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Cultural Appreciation vs. Cultural Appropriation: Why It Matters

By Grant Loveless

Learning to understand a culture that is different than your own is so important in becoming a mindful citizen and leader. Developing the skill of cultural or cross-cultural competence is challenging, but worth the journey as it is an important way to identify, not only your own prejudices and biases towards BIPOC, but also ways in which your community, home or school can create equitable spaces for people who are underserved. With that said, cultural appropriation and appreciation is a continuous conversation that has “canceled” celebrities, addressed the trauma and microaggressions that BIPOC have to combat day-to-day, and has assisted in uplifting and supporting BIPOC and their cultures as well. In this article, four tips will be given to you to identify, address, and approach cultural appropriation and appreciation wherever you are.

First, let's distinguish the two; appreciation is when someone seeks to understand and learn about another culture in an effort to broaden their perspective and connect with others cross-culturally whereas appropriation is simply taking, adopting or "cherry-picking" one aspect of a culture that is not your own and using it for your own personal interest. Simply, one requires permission (i.e cultural exchange) and the other is without. With this simple exercise, we'll see if you can identify the differences:

- Purchasing a piece of jewelry or clothing that may have important cultural significance to that culture, but simply using it as a fashion statement.
  - (*Appreciation or Appreciation*)
- Supporting an African artist by purchasing designs directly from them.
  - (*Appreciation or Appreciation*)
- Capturing a photo of a ritual ceremony simply for the sake of getting as many likes on Facebook as possible.
  - (*Appreciation or Appreciation*)
- Wearing a South Asian bindi when invited to do so at an Indian festival.
  - (*Appreciation or Appreciation*)

In all, taking a part of another culture without understanding what it truly means can be harmful not only to those whose culture you are using but also to those with whom you share it.

Through an interview with Dr. Khayree Williams, Austin Community College's Truth, Racial Healing & Transformation Campus Center Director, self-journeying strategies were developed to understand and identify appropriation and appreciation in your own communities, schools, homes and even get-togethers with friends:

1. **Examine your own culture**. Through self-reflection and evaluation, you will be better able to understand differences and determine what is important in cultures across the world. If you realize that a specific aspect of your own cultural background is the foundation to your identity, and it would offend you if someone were to use it without understanding fully what it means, consider that

people all over the world, in cultures other than your own, may feel exactly the same way.

    1. *Think about:* Would I be offended if someone wore an important aspect of culture without understanding what it truly means?

2. **Listen & be mindful:** As Williams said, "The greatest way to become knowledgeable and appreciate another culture is by listening and being mindful to those who are a part of the fabric of that culture or society." From that, your task is to listen to their stories, gain insight on the implications behind the aspects of their culture that you are interested in, and utilize that dialogue(s) to broaden your worldview.
    1. *Think about:* I recently purchased a well-decorated scarf from a Native-American artist. Did I take time to discuss with the artist who created the piece to learn more about their background, what their work means to them, and how it fits into the foundation of their identity? If not, I may be appropriating instead of appreciating.
3. **Analyze the context:** What does a symbol or outfit mean to a specific culture? When and where is it appropriate to use it? Grasp what the various aspects of a culture are and why they are so crucial. If you really have an interest in a person's culture or heritage, more than likely, they will be elated to share with you the aspects that matter to them.
    1. *Think about:* Did I just take a piece of someone's culture to use for my own benefit, without knowing the significance behind it? Did I ask about the origins of the custom, item, or symbol? This is so important in understanding and appreciating a culture.
4. **Be open to teach and share your own culture:** The most meaningful part of cultural exchange – and what best tells the difference from appropriation is that exchange is **mutual**. Williams said, "At ACC, through my work, I am able to teach and help others understand who they are, how to gain insight and a unique perspective about someone else or a group and create those relationships and a shared understanding of someone and their background and culture."
    1. *Think about:* Am I equally interested in sharing a piece of my culture and heritage with someone else? Chances are, this person is just as eager to learn about my culture as I am about theirs. This is a beautiful and warming component of cultural exchange and appreciation!

Be mindful, do not stop being curious, and learning and appreciating other cultures. Do it properly, with guidance and mindfulness and you will be the change needed to uplift and amplify the voices of BIPOC whose language, food, and traditions are deeply rooted in who they are.

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